

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Dan Kelly. I am a teacher in Deer Lodge for Deer Lodge Elementary School. I have taught in Deer Lodge for thirty-one years, twenty-three years in the sixth grade, and the last eight years in junior high. I am also the president of our local teachers' union, the Deer Lodge Education Association. I support Senate Bills 69 and 70.

Our staff, both certified and classified, work hard for the kids in Deer Lodge. We've been lucky to have a supportive school board, and we've had the same superintendent for twenty-six years.

Our community values education. Since I have lived there, we have never defeated a final levy vote. In fact, we have never defeated a levy of any kind, including building reserves or technology levies.

But, we face tremendous challenges. Twenty-three percent of our students qualify for special education. That is approximately double the state average. Because of this, we must consistently use General Fund dollars to support Special Education.

We have a large at-risk population. Forty-seven percent of our students presently qualify for free or reduced lunch. With the recent layoffs at the sawmill, that number will likely increase.

We have reduced staff in two of the last three years. Next year, we anticipate cutting at least three tenured teaching positions and reducing hours for others. These are people with six years of experience in the district. We are

facing larger class sizes and a loss of some programs. Cuts are planned for classified staff, as well. We likely will be unable to meet all the state accreditation standards, let alone the special needs of so many of our kids.

We continually face maintenance problems for our aging buildings. We have installed a state-of-the art Bio-Mass heating system and motion sensor lights to address rising energy costs. Next year, we will be forced to mothball Trask Hall, which was built in the 1870's and was Montana's first institution of higher learning. We still use this grand old building, but energy and maintenance costs are now outweighing its historic value.

If you were to walk into my building a few days ago, you would see an old building that almost shines it's so clean. But, if you looked more closely, you'd notice some serious problems. Today, with temperature expected to be near 60 degrees, you would see a hallway lined with garbage cans and buckets to catch the water leaking from the roof. We are missing whole sections of ceiling tiles that have fallen off since the maintenance staff repaired them last summer. In December, we had to vacate some of the eighth graders' lockers because the water was seeping in and damaging textbooks.

Our building has its original single-pane windows. When the temperature drops, as it always does, a person could safely hang meat in several of our classrooms.

This year, we have been forced to cancel all field trips. This is the first year since I've been in Deer Lodge that our seventh and eighth graders will not have a chance to visit Helena during the Legislative session. Many of my students don't get many other opportunities to travel to Helena, even though it's only 55 miles away.

There is no money budgeted for textbooks next year. There is no money budgeted for new equipment.

In years when funding was increased by the state, our district has not realized the full benefit because of decreasing enrollment. An increase in the Quality Educator Payment helps districts like ours that have fixed costs, coupled with a declining enrollment.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you today. I respectfully urge your support for Senate Bills 69 and 70. Thank you.